



Editorial

In this issue, Satyendra Shenoy, a member of a few years from Mumbai tells us about the tribulations – if not trials – of realising his lifelong ambition to settle in Germany. What eventually made this possible was discovering,

as a benchside scientist, how rewarding scientific and medical writing is, which enabled him to set up as a freelancer in Cologne. Although it is relatively easy as an EU citizen to work as a freelance writer in Germany, it is not quite so straightforward for non-EU citizens, and there is no shortage of advice in Satyen's article.

Another new member, Uwe Kollenkirchen, also working as a freelancer after a long career in research, gives us his personal opinion on one of the blocks in the Expert Seminar Series (ESS) introduced at the Dublin Conference in 2015 for experienced colleagues looking for in-depth exploration

of topics. Sam Hamilton responds to his comments. The ESS was generally very well received, although both Uwe and Sam – and other attendees – felt that there should be much more opportunity for discussion and questions.

As a new freelancer, Uwe is also acutely aware of the cost of attending conferences and has some interesting comments on the cost effectiveness of attending conferences in an article he prepared based on a questionnaire about conference attendance cost.

A year ago, Janet Davies reported on setting up business as a freelancer in the Azores. In this issue, she takes stock one year on, and things are still looking very positive!

We wish you all the best for 2016 and look forward to seeing you in Munich in May.

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Freelancing in Germany – Oddventures of a non-EU guy

In a few months, it will have been five years since – in a moment of serendipity – I ventured into medical writing. Throughout my career as a benchside researcher, writing has been a part of the job, be it sections of manuscripts or research proposals or conference posters, and yet I had never thought I'd take up writing as a full-time occupation. I believe that mine is not a unique case since most medical writers have in one way or the other taken this road after coming from diverse backgrounds. However, in the context of medical writers freelancing in Germany, I presume that I am one of the very few who are citizens of a non-EU country and who moved here to establish themselves in this profession. This piece is my account of the experiences and findings, the trials and tribulations, and ultimately hanging up my shingle in Germany.

Germany? Really? But why?

I have been asked this question one time too often to count; by friends, family, colleagues, immigration

officials, the lot. And I can list many a reason, professional and personal:

- Germany is the second-largest market for medical writing in Europe after the UK.
- German immigration laws allow non-citizens to practice their trade as self-employed persons (*Selbständige*) or freelance rs (*Freiberufler*).
- I had lived in Cologne, Germany, since the end of 2011 and had some idea of the lie of the land.
- In Germany, writing – even technical and medical – comes under the category of arts, and writers are classified as artists. This is a bonus in terms of social security and insurance (I won't go into details here but one can look up '*Künstlersozialkasse*', the KSK). Moreover, various financial and tax incentives make it a less bumpy ride for business start-ups.
- Germany is diverse and cosmopolitan, and while English may not be as widely spoken as in Scandanavia or The Netherlands, life is fairly easy despite no knowledge of German (but learning the language of the land one wishes to reside in is practical, after all).

These are some of the many reasons that can bolster one's confidence to set up one's writing shop here. However, for me, the one that was at the heart was a deep desire since childhood to live in Germany. So, when towards the end of 2013 I came to the proverbial fork in my career path, I hung up my lab-coat and took the road that beckoned the medical writer in me.

To job or not to job, that is indeed the question

The decision to freelance was not an easy one to take. After all, a steady 9-to-5 in the employ of an organisation, regular entries in the bank at the end of the month, paid vacations, and the comfortable security of all these are indeed desired by most of us, myself included. And yet, one must consider what one can bring on board while applying for a job; after all, that is what the person hiring is looking for. My plus points were a background in academic and pharmaceutical research and a proficiency in English. However, I was (and still am) a newbie with a limited track record and no experience in certain types of medical writing viz. regulatory, which are more sought after. In other words, not the ideal candidate most employers advertise for. It was at this juncture, after a few unsuccessful interviews, that I was reminded of a meeting I had walked into while attending the EMWA Spring conference in 2012 – the Freelancer Business Forum. It was here that I first got to hear the stories and experiences of fellow EMWA members who were freelancers and running their own enterprises. As fascinating as well as insightful this meeting was, my thought at the moment was “This is too bold and fanciful an idea for me”. However, the seed had been sown. And after a fruitless wait to hear back from potential employers, I finally decided to do myself a favour and employ myself. This may appear to have been somewhat epiphanous; in reality, it was anything but. The decision to set up my own shop was made after a lot of hard thinking, weighing the pros and cons of such a venture, and yes, plenty of research on the feasibility of turning this bold and fanciful idea into a reality.

Well researched is half begun (and I daresay, a quarter done)

Just type in key words like *freelancer, medical writing, Germany, etc.* in Google search and one is presented with a few dozen pages of hits. Of course, as with any general search, one has to separate the chaff from the wheat. There are a number of private websites and forums that offer specialised advice for those wishing to move to Germany; however, I must note here that most have the same information,

possibly cut and pasted from other sites (and since there is no way of tracking where the original info came from, I am not providing references). What these sites do provide is a general idea on what is required to work as a freelancer in Germany, the procedure to follow, the governmental agencies involved, the paperwork required for the application, etc. Yet other community websites like Toytown Germany (<http://www.toytowngermany.com>) that are managed by resident expats (and there are plenty of them) give plenty of useful insights in and advice on life in Germany, down to city and town level.

With reference to freelancing as a medical writer in Germany, most helpful to me were two comprehensive back-to-back articles^{1,2} by Stefan Lang (Scientific & Medical Writing, <http://www.scientific-medical-writing.de>), published in Medical Writing (formerly The Write Stuff), the quarterly journal of the European Medical Writers Association (EMWA). Alistair Reeves (Ascribe Medical Writing and Translation, <http://www.ascribe.de>) and Sam Hamilton (Sam Hamilton Medical Writing Services Limited, <http://www.samhamiltonmwservices.co.uk>), veteran medical writers based in Europe and senior EMWA members, have also penned a few insightful articles that address specific issues dealing with running a freelance writing business. In addition, the Out On Our Own section of Medical Writing features useful information, experiences, and pointers from EMWA members who work freelance in Germany and other EU countries. All in all, thanks to the present Internet age, a lot of useful information is just a click away.

Visa – for anywhere you want to be

So what is the first requirement for a medical writer from outside EU to freelance in Germany? As in any other country, a non-national requires authorisation to reside and be employed in Germany, including those who are self-employed or work freelance. Of course, citizens of EU (including those in the European Economic Area or with Swiss citizenship) are free to start up a business in Germany but for those who are not EU citizens, the first step is to procure an ‘Aufenthaltserlaubnis’ (residence permit). And the governmental agency that provides this is the ‘Ausländeramt’ (Foreigner's Office, henceforth referred to as The Amt). This august bureaucratic office is not to be confused with the Auswärtiges Amt, the German Foreign Office, which operates at the federal level and among other things governs Germany's foreign missions. The Amt, on the other hand, is a part of the

Interior Ministry of the respective states in Germany and is responsible for all decisions regarding resident foreigners in that particular state. So this is the agency that decides on an applications made by non-EU persons; it may consult other local and national agencies regarding such an application, but it is the one that has the final say. I must add a corollary here – since applications for residence permits have to be made at the offices of The Amt in the city where one wishes to set up their business, one must have decided on the location (and the rationale behind it, e.g. close to the pharma belt near Frankfurt) beforehand. It is acceptable to change one's residence after moving to Germany but one won't be granted a 'general approval' to arrive in Germany and then choose a city/town/hamlet/cave to work from.

So how exactly does an aspiring freelance writer from outside the EU make an application? Well, if one is already in Germany with a valid residence permit, then they put together an application packet. Alternatively, they can consult the pertinent case officer at or refer to the website of The Amt on what goes in this packet. Generally speaking, the application has all their details and credentials, financial documents, and a business plan that explains how and why they want to run their venture in Germany, and submit it to the local offices of The Amt. If one doesn't have an existing residence permit (and presumably isn't in Germany at that point), then one has to make the application at the nearest German foreign mission in the country of one's citizenship. An important point to note here is that a person who is in Germany on a temporary visa (tourist, business, etc.) cannot make a direct application for a long-term visa (be it for freelancing or even with a job offer from a German company) while in Germany. An exception to this rule has been made for non-EU nationals from the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Republic of Korea, and Israel; citizens of these countries are allowed to arrive in Germany on a temporary visa and then apply for a residence permit. Whilst applying from outside Germany, another important point to keep in mind is that German foreign missions do not issue residence permits, the authority to do so lies only with The Amt. So once an application has been submitted to an Embassy or a Consulate, it will be forwarded to the pertinent office of The Amt where the applicant wishes to live. The Amt will then review the application (very carefully, and in consultation with other agencies like the local Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Federal Employment Agency, etc) and make a decision.

Once the mission receives an approval of the application, it will issue a temporary visa lasting three months. Thereafter on arrival in Germany, one has to visit The Amt in person (of course, after having made an appointment) with other documents like city registration (Anmeldung), health insurance, local bank statement, etc. in order to apply for a residence permit.

I would like to add an extra paragraph here to remark on an important aspect of this procedure – the time frame. In my case, my Aufenthaltserlaubnis was at the point of elapsing by the time I had decided to apply for a permit to freelance, and hence I had to return to India, my native land, to submit my application. All my research, as well as discussions with a couple of other freelancers I knew, told me that the process took between six weeks and three months. I had submitted my application in October last year and it was April, a good seven months later, before I received an email from the German Consulate, telling me that my application had been approved. It was a long and hard wait, especially since I had submitted every possible document and proof The Amt had asked for, and was already in the 'Go' mode as far as setting up my consultancy, Describe, in Germany was concerned. Especially since I could think of not one valid reason for the decision to be delayed by so long. It was a period of uncertainty and self-doubt, of frustration and incredulity with the cogs of bureaucracy, of plodding through time, of watching my eagerness and resolve dissipate. It was also a lesson in surmounting these negative emotions and keeping hope, being patient, and having a positive outlook.

The reason to share this snippet is to highlight the fact that despite being well-prepared and meeting all the requirements, there are elements that are simply beyond one's control, that exist in Murphyland, governed by his laws. My case was fairly straightforward and I was not asked by the The Amt or the Consulate to provide anything else in support of my application. Despite this, it took a while before my application was greenlighted. While visiting The Amt after arriving in Germany, I asked my case officer why it had taken so long and if it was because of shortcomings in my application. She was most sympathetic, as was her shrugged response, "It happens sometimes." Such are the machinations of bureaucracy, I suppose, and not just in Germany.

The current page...

Things have come to pass, ever since, and mostly in my favour. I have now completed all the requisite

paperwork pertaining to residency, gotten my tax ID from the Finanzamt, etc. and Describe is now open for the exciting business of medical writing. Of course, it is still early days and the challenges have not ended with being granted the approval to work as a freelance writer in Germany; au contraire, they have just begun. It will take some time and work to establish my business and to achieve the two main goals behind this fanciful dream of mine – to develop myself as a good writer and to help propagate medical writing as a career in Germany. But my best efforts are definitely underway.

“No man is an island” is a cliché, I agree. But it is also very true. I may have driven this dream of mine, and in return, been driven by it; but in achieving it, I have also received help and support from many a people. Being an EMWA member allowed me to seek advice from fellow members who have walked this path before and have graciously shared their experiences, either in print or via emails and personal chats. A special thanks to Sam Hamilton for her encouraging words when I first gave this ‘odventure’ serious thought, as well as for referring me to other EMWA members. And last but not least, my heartfelt thanks to my family, friends, and loved ones for all the support they rendered me in bringing my dream to fruition.

Today, as I draft this article about my experience as a freelance medical writer trying to make his way in Germany, I am reminded of a poem I learnt in school as a child, Robert Frost’s *The Road Not Taken*. “Two roads diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less travelled by, And that has made all the difference.” A wonderful difference at that, I must add, since for the first time in my life, I have a deep sense of satisfaction about my job.

Expert Seminar Series: A new-style session at EMWA conferences? A personal view

So far, the programme of the EMWA conferences has consisted of workshops (mainly for continuous education and EPDP certification), a full day symposium (for in-depth coverage of selected topics) and of some other pow-wows, e.g. welcome lecture, brief lectures on generic topics, short seminars, and the Freelance Business Forum.

Recently, a new type of session was introduced at the 40th EMWA Conference in Dublin earlier this year. The Expert Seminar Series consists of two consecutive independent sessions per seminar and is intended to supplement the educational conference portfolio.

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Useful links

1. http://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/EN/EinreiseUndAufenthalt/Visabestimmungen_node.html#doc480844bodyText5.
2. http://www.frankfurt-main.ihk.de/english/business/beginning_employer_selfemployed/index.html.
3. <http://www.stadt-koeln.de/service/produkt/selbststaendige-erwerbstaetigkeit-fur-auslaenderinnen-und-auslaender>

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I took the opportunity of attending two sessions of the new expert seminars. The first was on MedDRA coding and the second on the client-freelancer partnership. I wanted to get a first impression of what these seminars offer. I started my preparation for the sessions with looking at the information that is usually available in the online conference agenda. There I found a short description of the content, but, unfortunately, neither a participant profile, nor an objective, nor a slide set. I was actually a bit relieved because I didn’t need to prepare at all with no pre-workshop assignment, and no post-workshop assignment either, as for the workshops. And – no credits had to be earned.

Both sessions were presented largely in lecture style. In one session, group exercises were used to support

the understanding of the rather dry field of MedDRA coding, which definitely helped to digest the large body of information. Particularly outsiders (like me) will have had difficulties in following the content. The second session was much more interactive, which might be attributable to the topic of the client-freelancer partnership, but also to the auditorium. This seemed to consist almost exclusively of members of both groups, which most likely triggered the vivid discussion. The way both sessions were presented was strikingly similar to that of the regular workshops which form the bulk of the conference content.

The Expert Seminar Series events that I attended did not offer anything new in content and style – perhaps

the other series did. In addition, the two topics were so different that it seemed inappropriate to combine them in one series. Why not introduce a new kind of session at the annual conferences with a focus on *discussion* of specific medical writing topics? This would add value to the current programme and be likely be very welcome. The Expert Seminar Series could certainly serve this purpose, but would need to focus on important up-to-date topics maximising the interaction between presenter and audience.

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Response from EMWA Executive Committee

The target audience for the ESS was experienced medical writers, heads of medical writing departments, and industry leaders from other disciplines who want to learn about the latest developments affecting the medical writing industry and play a role in shaping the world of medical writing. The inaugural Dublin ESS focussed on developments in the field of regulatory and clinical medical writing, and featured sessions led by invited presenters, all recognized leaders in their field, on a broad range of topics of interest to medical writers.

ESS sessions – each comprising two topics – were held on Wednesday morning, Wednesday afternoon and Friday morning. Uwe attended the Wednesday afternoon ESS.

The post-conference survey revealed that 25.7% of conference attendees attended at least one ESS, so the participant profile could reasonably be expected to be the experienced group we had targeted. However, Uwe says ‘Particularly outsiders (like me) will have had difficulties in following the content’. Advice on who should attend was given with the expectation that experienced medical writers would have the most to gain from the ESS programme.

The post-conference survey asked respondents to rate each ESS individually. No ESS scored less than 4.19 out of a maximum possible score of 5 when rated for content or less than 4.27 out of 5 when rated for format. The Wednesday afternoon session that Uwe attended was rated 4.36 for

content and 4.42 for format – the highest scores of the three ESS sessions.

I led a team of 3 Executive Committee (EC) members in organising the Dublin ESS programme. I personally attended two of the three ESS sessions (4 topics of the 6 offered) and reviewed the feedback forms for all 6 topics whilst still in Dublin when the sessions themselves were fresh in my mind. Although comments were overwhelmingly positive, I felt that further benefit would be gained through format refinement. I will ensure that lessons learned in Dublin are carried forward to the Munich 2016 ESS programme which I am leading with 2 new team members, Raquel Billiones and Kathryn White. My team’s aims for the Munich ESS include more discussion time and speaker-audience interaction, a room set up that facilitates easier audience participation and better audio quality. The Munich abstracts are with us for review and the programme will be finalised in Q3/Q4 2015. I am therefore unable to comment on content at this stage.

The ESS programme will inevitably continue to develop. Future ECs may well decide to pre-designate ESS topics, but for the first couple of years, and under the current EC, we have decided to solicit content suggestions direct from members.

Uwe, I thank you for your comments and your views on the inaugural ESS programme.

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Contemplations of a freelancer on the 2015 EMWA Spring Conference: Was it worth the money? An attempt at a cost-efficiency evaluation

I don't know which factors drive your decision to attend a symposium when you do not have time to be away from your desk or you only have very limited funds in your budget to finance such an enterprise – or both. Certainly, the benefits of a conference like the EMWA annual meetings are obvious: networking, learning and discussing what's new in the field and what has changed, and acquiring new contracts.

After attending my first EMWA conference in autumn 2014 in Florence, I was waiting eagerly for the next one where I could continue learning more about the different disciplines in medical writing and engage in further networking with colleagues in the field and possibly companies. That was the plan.

After the programme for the 2015 spring conference in Dublin came out, I assiduously prepared my conference calendar. More than 60 workshops, lectures and social events had to be checked, sorted and prioritised. I tried to squeeze as many as possible into the three-and-a-half-day schedule. The hardest part was making the decision as to which workshops were important and should be in the shopping basket and which might be only a 'nice to have' and kept as an alternative. After finishing my favourites list, I realised that my basket had to be re-arranged. Second choices needed to be included because some of the first choice workshops ran parallel or were already sold out at an early stage. After all these decisions were made, I calculated the cost for the conference.

I discovered that the total cost of the conference summed up to approximately €2700 – quite a bit of money. The only potentially reducible cost was that for accommodation because I had chosen to stay in the pricey conference hotel in order to be directly on location. But I wanted to make the conference as effective as possible and not lose time by commuting back and forth to the conference venue.

Looking at the expected cost, I remembered our last family vacation and realised that two adults and two kids could easily spend at least one week at the beaches somewhere in southern Europe for that money. This made me rather hesitant and caused me to postpone my final decision to some time in the future. But finally, help with decision-making came unexpectedly only a few weeks later when I was asked whether I would like to write about the cost-efficiency of the next EMWA meeting. Obviously, I could not resist.

I immediately started contemplating how to approach the task and asked myself: 'What does cost – efficiency actually mean? And how can you measure it?' I looked up the term in Wikipedia and got a totally insufficient and inconclusive explanation. Other sources were more helpful. For example, in a good old thesaurus, it is described as 'reduction in cost' or 'being effective without wasting time or effort or expense'.¹ If 'effective' is translated here as 'to get more of something', like a product or hardware, then one gets an idea of what cost-effective means. But in the case of a conference we don't get hardware. The product we pay for is 'software' and it even depends on one's personal perception of it, which is highly variable. The perceived value for which we pay a certain amount of money can range from very little to enormous. In addition, even the value of money is subjective. But enough about the philosophical evaluation of the meaning of cost-efficiency, let's get to the facts.

Assuming that the cost efficiency evaluation of only one conference participant must be irrelevant, it was clear that, for a meaningful analysis, I needed data from other participants. Thus, I decided to use a questionnaire with which I collected the responses of 9 other conference participants who work as freelancers. The questionnaire focussed on information on expenditure for the conference and the perceived quality. In addition, free text comments were allowed. The results are shown in Table 1.

Most of the 10 freelancers who contributed to the poll participated in all conference days (four days);

Table 1: Cost and quality rating by freelancers attending the 40th EMWA conference in 2015. Ten freelancers from 8 European countries who had attended between 0 and 13 earlier EMWA conferences provided data and evaluations. Results are presented as median and range (in brackets)

Number of conference days attended	Number of workshops attended	Number of social events attended	Overall cost (€) of the conference ^a	Average cost (€) per conference day ^b	Conference quality ^c
4 (1–5)	3,5 (1–7)	2 (1–4)	2781 (970–3790)	734 (470–2320)	2 (1–4)

^aOverall conference cost include travel, accommodation, food, fees for conference, workshops, seminars, symposium and social events.

^bMedian of overall cost divided by number of conference days attended per participant.

^cRating of conference on a scale between 1 (excellent) and 6 (waste of money).

in some cases, one day of travel was added. Altogether, they attended a median of 3.5 workshops (including seminars and symposium) and two social events. Seven attendants participated in the entire conference, while three only stayed for one or two days. The attendance of workshops, seminars and symposium was variable, about one half signed up for four or more workshops out of a maximum possible of seven (two per day on Wednesday, Thursday and Friday, and one on Saturday).

The median cost for the conference was € 2781 (all participants). Eight of ten attendees paid more than €2300. The overall cost included travel, accommodation, food and beverages, extras and all conference fees. A median of €734 had to be paid for every conference day.

The quality of the workshops was rated as good. Four participants perceived them as excellent, and only two felt that improvements were necessary (four on the rating scale).

Compared to an evaluation of the EMWA spring conference in 2009 in Ljubljana,² this conference appeared to be considerably more expensive. The median cost per conference day back in 2009 was €580 and hence the cost had increased by approx. 27% in 2015. Total cost increased from median €1970 (Ljubljana) to €2781 (Dublin), a plus of more than €800.

What about quality? Seven out of ten participants rated the quality of the conference as good or excellent. The main strengths of this conference were seen as the possibility of networking and getting up-to-date information on important medical writing fields, such as regulatory procedures, information sources, writing skills. Content and presentation of the workshops, seminars and symposium were largely rated as good and adequate, although some workshops were considered as needing improvements. A careful evaluation of the attendee feedback, which is usually collected at the end of each single workshop, will most likely help to identify where corrective actions are needed.

The open text feedback returned with the questionnaire mainly referred to critical aspects – in other words, where room for improvement is seen with regard to cost-effectiveness. Major concerns were raised on the price of the conference. Although the conference fees were perceived as justified overall, the participants would appreciate less expensive conferences in the future. Most of them thought that finding less expensive European cities that are easy to reach would help lowering the overall cost. Cities like Lyon, Barcelona and Berlin were mentioned, but there are many more options. Less expensive hotels should also be considered

instead of big hotel chains like the Hilton, which are usually rather costly. Fundraising through corporate sponsorship should be used to aid the reduction of conference fees.

Some participants raised the question of whether the workshop fees were appropriate and criticised that the advanced workshops were more expensive than the foundation workshops. More room for sessions with no extra charge would be welcomed. There was a big difference at this conference between the availability of open (no charge) and closed (extra charge) sessions (7 vs. 57). The introduction of more lectures or other type of open sessions would provide the opportunity for further learning, networking and exchange of ideas particularly when workshops are full and alternatives were not available at time of booking. An increased number of no-charge sessions would potentially attract an audience that does not want to participate exclusively in workshops, but likes to take advantage of the conference's other benefits. A more diverse program along with increased options to individually tailor spending would serve the needs of newcomers and senior writers alike. Newcomers could keep their costs low and seniors could take advantage of an increased number of 'advanced' sessions.

The proposals that were made by the freelancers who participated in this poll are in line with some of the suggestions for cost reduction which were made by participants of the Ljubljana conference (e.g. cheaper conference rates, cheaper hotels, more sponsoring of workshops).² Both groups were also quite consistent in their appraisal of the good quality of the conference: largely good workshops, good organisation, good opportunities for networking.

Finally, allow me a personal note: I think that the concept of charging for the conference admission (€580) and for the attendance of the workshops (up to €950) should be revisited. The conference itself, outside workshops, expert seminars and symposium, does not offer much to justify the relatively high registration fee. It is appreciated, however, that lunch and boarding during the breaks are included, which is very convenient and supports networking. Consider re-evaluating the importance of the workshop and seminar program and possibly select workshops with low frequency of attendance to be offered free of extra charge or substitute them with different types of sessions, e.g. lectures or discussion forums at future conferences.

Special thanks to those freelancer colleagues from Italy, France, Germany, Poland, Finland, The Netherlands and Austria who shared their conference costs and opinions with me. I appreciate your openness and support. In addition, I thank Lauren

Franklin-Steinmetz for proofreading and correction of the article. It substantially increased my level of comfort with it.

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Out on the ocean: A year of freelancing in the Azores

Last year, Janet Davies left her job in the Netherlands, moved to Faial Island in the Azores, and became a freelancer.¹ Here she gives us an update on the ups and downs of freelancing on a volcano!

Although often I may prefer to be gardening or swimming rather than doing paid work at the computer, on the whole I am thoroughly content with the freelance lifestyle, especially here in such a gorgeous environment. I love living here. I am looking forward to moving into our restored house in the next 2–3 months, and then to start work on our newly acquired *atafona* (more below) next year. It is good to have plans. I have completed a beginner's course in Portuguese and will continue taking lessons in the autumn. It is a slow process.

I still don't have a website for the business. The question is, do I really need one? I have a more-or-less up to date LinkedIn profile and am listed on the EMWA and BELS (Board of Editors in the Life Sciences) sites. I remain reluctant. Not only because I don't like the idea of being so public but also because I have a perfectly manageable number of clients (and hence workload) right now. I'd be interested to know what other freelancers think on the pros and cons of a website.

Here are some thoughts on issues I have faced during the past year or so as a new freelancer. I'm sure many of these issues will be familiar to all freelancers, seasoned ones as well as newbies like me.

Paying taxes

This was my first year of paying Portuguese taxes. I was pleasantly surprised by how much less than expected I had to pay in business tax. We even got a refund on our personal taxes. So far so good. But there is yet the form to complete on our worldwide income for the Dutch tax authorities. And my Dutch accountant has left the office and is not responding to emails. This is one issue that is now languishing near the bottom of my to-do list but comes to the fore at 4 a.m. I am glad to have a reliable accountant here – Sandra – it is money well spent. Earlier this year I received an unexpected visit from the tax

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inspectors because they said I had underpaid my social security contributions by about 3 euros. I referred them to Sandra. All sorted, no problem!

Importance of networking

I do miss one aspect of employment: interactions with and the support of colleagues. This year I was invited to a Medical Writers' Spring Retreat run by Kathryn White (Cathean Ltd) and held in Nettlebed, Oxfordshire. It was an inspiring, informative, and fun event: one of those activities that are essential for isolated freelancers like me, because it provided an opportunity to discuss with other freelancers those tricky tasks such as negotiating fees and, for example, how to deal with clients who ask you to keep time free for future projects that either don't materialise or are horribly delayed.

One thing I learned at Kathryn's Retreat is that we all need *good* clients. That is, those who like what we do and don't quibble about fees, those with whom we have a friendly yet professional relationship, those with whom we have a rapport and open communication. That may be one reason to create a website: to attract more good clients. 'Bad' clients are those who make unreasonable demands yet are not willing to pay reasonable rates.

Several of my clients have wanted me to work faster and thereby cost less. I have been wondering whether I am slow. After talking to a couple of writer friends who had similar experiences I have decided I am careful and thorough but not slow. I think I need to steer clear of those clients.

Indemnity insurance

One of the difficult issues I faced in this first year was a requirement (by a new client) for professional indemnity insurance. Rather stupidly, I took out some insurance (though I have no idea whether the coverage is appropriate) before looking for information on this topic on the EMWA website and on LinkedIn. I am not a big fan of insurance in general, which I see as something of a scam, preying upon our insecurities, and I believe that indemnity insurance should not be necessary for medical writers or editors. We work with material that is either provided by our client or already published, and any piece we

submit to our clients undergoes several more rounds of checking and approval (and probably alteration beyond our control once we are no longer involved in the project). The second time a new client required indemnity insurance I asked what risks were to be covered. I have not received a reply.

No IT support

This week I have been bemoaning my lack of IT support. Some keys on my desktop's keyboard stopped working. And now I can't even start up the computer because my password contains one of the non-working letters. I'm hoping it has to do with the high humidity here and the keys will work again in drier weather... Or perhaps I do now have to splash out on a whole new desktop. The computer is now 13 years old and I can no longer update the operating system because there isn't enough memory, but the computer still works (bar the keyboard) perfectly well. I don't know about you, but I resent the perpetual software updates computers need and vehemently object to the built-in obsolescence of modern gadgetry. But perhaps I am giving my age away!

My "office"

The timing may not have been perfect – we are still restoring our cottage while living in rented accommodation – but when the *atafona* (barn-like outbuilding) adjoining our land came up for sale last year, we had to buy it. Not only because we wouldn't want to be overlooked by an ugly modern house (a likely fate for this structure if we didn't own it) but also because it will be very useful. We can use the ground floor for its original purpose (food storage, animal housing) and as a workshop and the upper floor as guest accommodation and an



Figure 1: The former ruin, now a house with roof, doors, and windows.



Figure 2: The *atafona* (right), with a small cart house (left).

office for me. Eventually. Which leads me to another freelancer issue: my office.

In our rented accommodation my desk is in the middle of our living space. Not ideal. It will not be



Figure 3: The helpful cats, Mouse (tabby) and Pico (black).

much better in our house: my desk will probably be in a corner of the bedroom. To be fair, it is a large bedroom on the ground floor and overlooking the sea, but still it will not be ideal. I now know I really need a place where I can concentrate, away from interruptions. So I look forward to the time when we can convert the upper floor of the *atafona*. I forgot to mention that the business bought it, so it will be a nice big tax-deductible expense for this year!

The sedentary nature of our work means it is important to exercise. Since I now have only a two-second commute from bedroom to desk and lack the self discipline to take myself out for a walk every day, I am thinking about using a standing desk. Several people have told me that after a brief period of getting used to it, they love their standing desk. If you use one, please do let me know what you think of it. Does it also deter helpful cats? (We now have two.)

Self discipline

Did I mention that I had left my alarm clock behind in the Netherlands? It is lovely to wake when I am

ready, but it tends to be a little late. Even in the summer, sunrise here is around 6:30 a.m., and as there is a large volcano between us and the sun rising in the East (we are in the south-western corner of the island, overlooking the Atlantic Ocean to the south west), it doesn't get properly light until 8:30 to 9:30, depending on the weather. So my working day starts quite late. Generally that isn't a problem, but I do like to get out to see (and harvest) whatever's growing in the garden, and perhaps do a spot of therapeutic weeding. So if I could arrange my workload to get all my project work done in a couple of hours a day that would suit me fine. Trouble is, of course, as I'm sure every freelancer knows, the workload doesn't flow so conveniently!

Attending the next EMWA meeting

I really do want and need to attend the next EMWA meeting. I hope to see you there!

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Freelance foraging

Interesting that 'topless' has entered the Spanish language and seems to have disappeared from English. And let's hope there are no 'deadguards' on duty!

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